DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 415 980 PS 026 164

AUTHOR Smalls, Ursula S.
TITLE Reacting in the Best Interest of Our Kids.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 22p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; *Grade Repetition; High Risk Students; Intervention; Remedial Programs; Student Promotion; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Surveys

ABSTRACT

At some time in most teachers' professional lives, they will be faced with making a decision about retaining a student. Although many teachers choose to retain students because they believe it will benefit the student, most studies find the practice of retention either harmful or ineffective. After a review of the literature, a survey was conducted to assess teachers' criteria for and beliefs about grade retention. Thirty-eight teachers at an elementary school with a very high at-risk population were given a 21-question survey. Results showed that 61 percent believe in retaining students who are not ready to move on to the next grade. Many believe that students who cannot read should not be promoted; however, they do not all agree that standardized reading test scores should be an indicator of whether to promote or retain a student. Many teachers believe that retention can mean the difference between future success or failure for some students. Those teachers who had retained students and were able to keep up with the students' progress believed that, in most cases, the children benefited. Reasons given for retention included great potential but lack of effort, need for special education but refusal of parents to permit it, and excessive absences. Teachers agreed that retention is more beneficial in primary rather than upper grades, and that social promotion is not beneficial. Teachers supported strong intervention programs and "bridge" or ungraded classes for at-risk students. (Contains six references.) (EV)

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Reacting in the Best Interest of Our Kids

By Ursula S. Smalls

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Reacting in the Best Interest of Our Kids

Abstract

Researchers say grade retention is a harmful and ineffective practice. They also say that social promotion is not the answer either. Elementary school teachers who in the past retained students believe that the children benefited from being retained. These teachers also have offered suggestions for alternatives to grade retention. The teachers suggest early intervention literacy programs, ungraded, bridge and gates classes for at risk students in the primary grades. A survey in the form of a questionnaire on the topic of grade retention was conducted. Thirty eight teachers were surveyed. The main focus of the questions were of conditions under which a child should repeat a grade, its benefits and alternatives to grade retention.

At some time in a teachers professional life there is a puzzling decision that has to be made. That decision is whether or not to retain a student. A teacher must think about the consequences of retaining or promoting students who do not meet the standardized reading score requirement for passing.

I have taught fifth grade for six years and during this time period I have retained three students for academic reasons. I believed that if these students were promoted they would at some time drop out of school. One student could not read. He scored a one percentile on the reading test for three years. This student was very frustrated. He was evaluated for special education in the third grade. His mother was against placing him in special needs classes. This student worked best in one to one or buddy setting. When frustrated at not being able to complete simple task, he became very angry. He would miss a lot of school days. Another student was also in a resource room program. Her resource teacher conversed with me often. Resource did not seem to be the answer to her academic problems. She did very little work. She was quite detached from her

surroundings. I spoke to the guidance counselor to see if she would talk with her to see what may be troubling her. This student would not open up to anyone. She did not do her class work or homework on a regular basis. Her mother did not believe her child needed special education. She believed her child just did not apply herself. The choice to retain these students was very hard. I believed an extra year would benefit them. An extra year would allow for them to mature and they could use the extra year as remediation. This decision was made because the parents were against special education. The third student was very smart especially very verbal. He also was in resource, but had been decertified because of his high performance on standardized test. His resource teacher believed he had Attention Deficit Disorder. I found this student to be extremely lazy and very selective in what he wanted to do. He would not attempt any task that he did not want to do. He completed a total of four assignments the whole school year. This included both class work and homework. Whenever I would stand over him or work with him he would after some coercing attempt to work. Once I left his side, all work became history. He would sit and day dream, draw or make paper objects. I met with the school based management team. It was conclusive that he did not need special education or resource room. We agreed that it would be necessary to retain him if he showed no academic progress. Hopefully he would mature and become a responsible student.

At the time that I had to make decisions of whether or not to retain, I believed it to be best to retain so that the

students would not get frustrated in school and later drop out. For the last student, I did not believe it to be beneficial to pass a student to the next grade when he had not met the requirements for fifth grade.

I would like to believe that my decision to retain these students was a wise one and that my actions helped prepared them for future success and not have a negative impact on their lives. The question of whether it was helpful to retain these students reoccurred in my mind over and over.

Hundreds of thousands of students are retained every year, but retaining students is absolutely contrary to the best research evidence. Most studies find the practice of retention to be either harmful or ineffective (House, 1991, p. 41).

Gerald Bracey writes "Selective Retention" an article about the views of Lucille Nickalson. He points out Ms. Nickalson's view that is there are four reasons for questioning the practice of retaining students. She says that, "Retention practices vary widely across the country; they even vary even within a single district; students have failed to turn up benefits for retention; and the practice of retention is expensive in the terms of time, effort and money" (Bracey, 1988, p. 379-380).

The question to whether grade retention is a harmful and ineffective practice will be the main focus of this paper. It includes the views of administrators, educators and parents on this topic.

WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS ABOUT GRADE RETENTION

Researchers have linked retention and its impact on self

esteem to the problem of students dropping out of school.(Natale, 1991, p. 30). Most studies find the practice of retention either harmful or ineffective. According to researchers Mary Lee Smith and Lorrie Shepard the average findings across all studies show that students who are retained are a quarter of a standard deviation worse off than comparable students who were promoted. They say that this negative effect is stronger when academic achievement is considered alone as a basis for retention. (House, 1991, p. 41).

According to Roy Doyle, a professor of education at Arizona State University, repetition of grades has no special value for children. He says that "The educational gain of the majority of non promoted students subsequent to their retention is smaller than that of their matched age mates who were promoted."(Doyle, 1989, p. 216).

Researchers Thomas Holmes and Kenneth Matthews reviewed 50 years of research in student retention. Their findings also showed that nonpromoted students generally make less progress than comparable low achieving students who were promoted. Their findings held true for every dependent variable examined, from achievement in various academic areas to social and emotional adjustment.(Doyle, 1989, p. 216). They also agreed on the research that harmful effects of retention were most pronounced in reading. Holmes and Matthews believe that those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes.(Doyle, 1989, p. 216).

According to the research of Mary Lee Smith and Lorrie A. Shepard, some educational reformers have advocated promotion from grade to grade strictly on the basis of achievement rather than age or attendance. Some schools and school districts have set up a "promotional gate" policy in which the gate swings open when pupils pass tests and slam shut when they fail.(Smith and Shepard, 1987, p. 129). Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Shepard believe students who are retained pay with a year of their lives. And no matter how teachers and parents explain retention to the students they understand that they are being taken away from their agemates because of some failure. This causes students to become upset and causes them to feel shame (Smith and Shepard, 1987, p. 130).

Research shows that retention leads to problems in student self esteem. A 1980 study revealed that children who were presented with a list of decidedly bad things, thought flunking a grade was only slightly less traumatic than a parent's death or going blind (Natale, 1991, p. 31).

The stigmatizing effects on children of being retained are stunning. In one study, girls who were retained refused to identify themselves as having been held back. In spite of the euphemisms employed by both parents and teachers, these very young children called it flunking. Some students concealed that they had flunked. Other students reported being teased and ridiculed by their peers. Eighty four percent reported feeling "sad, bad, or upset". Only six percent reported any positive feelings and even those feelings were mixed with

negative ones. Forty eight percent of children studied said that their parents were "mad" and twenty eight percent said their parents were "sad". These interviews without a doubt suggest immediate trauma of being retained. Flunking evokes ridicule and punishment, shame and humiliation. (House, 1991, p. 42).

Supporters of retention

There are some teachers, parents and administrators who are advocates for retention. These people believe an additional year of schooling can mean the difference between success and failure for certain students (Natale, 1991, p. 31). Some supporters of retention say that high academic standards and social promotion- passing children from grade to grade simply because the school calendar and child's age dictate it - do not go together (Natale, 1991, p. 32).

Ernest House author of The Perniciousness of Flunking Students" opposes retention. He reports, however, that if retention might be expected to have benefits, it is in kindergarten. He says that children enter with widely varying maturity, and background and are less likely to be aware of the stigmatizing effects of being retained. The results can also be negative. Parents reported emotional problems that had arose from retention (House, 1991, p. 41).

Views of administrators, teachers and parents

In one large school district seventy four percent of principals, sixty five percent of teachers and fifty nine percent of parents thought students should "always" or "usually" be retained if they qualified. "Lack of basic skills" was a criteria for retention that most agreed upon. More than half of the principals and teachers thought that "emotional maturity" was also a good enough reason to retain a student, but only nineteen percent of the parents thought so. The parents did not think that excessive absences was a sufficient reason for retention, but most educators did. Parents who endorsed the practice did not want their own children retained (House, 1991, p. 41-43).

Many teachers believe that retention would save the child from becoming frustrated and failing in the future. (House, 1991, p. 43). Teachers have deep seated beliefs about development of children. Half of the teachers in one study believed that children develop in a linear fashion, "unfolding" through set stages, and that unfolding occurs largely outside the control of teachers and parents. Teachers who believed this held back large numbers (House, 1991, p. 43).

Teachers such as remediationists held back less than one or two percent. Remediationists believe that teachers could teach necessary skills to all students. Many teachers endorse retention, but not all practice it (House, 1991, p. 43).

Eighty nine percent of teachers studied believe retaining students to be effective and eight percent of the teachers expressed doubt of the effectiveness of retaining a student (House, 1991, p. 42).

Alternatives to retention

To prevent retention, educators have suggested everything from smaller classes to more parent involvement to evaluating the curriculum to find out how well it is suited to the students at various age levels. Some experts believe that the answer is to give more individualize attention to children. The problem with this is that individualization is very costly says Samuel G. Sava, executive director of National Association of Elementary School Principals. He also says that there is a need to keep the primary grades' teacher student ratio one to fifteen (Natale, 1991,p. 32).

A growing number of schools and school districts are concluding that the problem has to do with the way schools are structured. They have rigid grade level structures and they do not always take individual learning rates into account. This can constrict children who do not fit the rigidly defined standards (Natale, 1991, p. 32).

In Kentucky the government and school officials had plans of rebuilding the education system from the ground up. In 1992 elementary schools were supposed to do away with grade levels through third grade. Youngsters would be expected to work at the ungraded primary level until they master a set of skills. "The goal would be to have all students by the time they're

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nine years old, ready to do fourth grade work" said Jim Parks, a spokesman for the state education department (Natale, 1991, p. 32). Other schools are adding remedial programs to the existing structure-after school tutoring sessions or summer schools through which students can get extra help. They are used early on - when a student appears to be failing (Natale, 1991, p. 33).

Several states have revised their views on retention in 1990. In Massachusetts, The Education Commissioner Harold Raynolds, Jr. encouraged the school systems to replace retention with alternative strategies to improve student achievement. The incentive given was that those districts that made changes would be able to receive certain discretionary funds (Natale, 1991, p. 30-31).

The boldest statewide measure occurred in Texas when the state board of education banned retention in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes. The department also scrapped traditional classes that added another year to a child's education (Natale, 1991, p. 33).

Remedial programs can be a good alternative to retention, Shepard says, but perhaps not enough. Many efforts to help low achieving students are made with the assumption that kids can't learn or give students watered down material. To put retention to rest and make new strategies succeed requires "A change in the knowledge base of the professionals involved." Teachers feel that they are constrained by standardized tests (Natale, 1991, p. 33).

Sandra Feldman, the president of The American Federation of Teachers, states that social promotion- moving students along to higher grades before they are ready spells disaster for everyone involve, but believes traditional retention is not the answer either. She believes that a comprehensive approach that will head off failure well before it occurs is the answer to getting kids to achieve (Feldman, 1997, p. 4). Mrs. Feldman mentions in her article "Passing on Failure" examples of reforms that are being made in some school systems. In Cincinnati they have implemented immediate intervention. They have in-class, small group instruction or multi-age grouping and they also offer tutoring and summer school. They have also formulated "plus classes" for students in third, sixth, and eighth grade who are at the age which it is inappropriate to remain with younger students. These classes have fewer students than regular classes do and an intensive, different approach to teaching students the specific knowledge and skills they have not yet mastered (Feldman, 1997, p. 8).

In Albuquerque, the principal and the parents must be notified early if retention is anticipated, and a special support program is designed for each child in danger of failing. Albuquerque also stipulates that no student can be retained without a specific intervention plan detailing that student's need and how they will be met (Feldman, 1997, p. 8).

An important ingredient to ensure students success is that we need to adopt rigorous standards that are clear to parents, teachers, and students. The standards should be accompanied

by grade by grade curricula and assessment that make it possible for teachers to know in time when children are in trouble so they can seek timely intervention. We also need well educated and well trained teachers in classrooms (Feldman, 1997, p. 8-9).

What Teachers Say About Grade Retention

I decided to conduct a survey to assess the criteria and beliefs of teachers on grade retention. I surveyed thirty eight of my colleagues. We work in an elementary school which has a very high at risk population. The survey was in the form of a written questionnaire. There were twenty one questions. The first fifteen were to be answered on a five point system ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The remaining questions were open ended. The results of the questionnaire are listed below.

Results of questionnaire

Sixty percent of the teachers surveyed were female and thirteen percent were male. Eighteen percent were between the ages of twenty two and thirty, eleven percent were between the ages of thirty one and forty, eight percent were between the ages of forty one and fifty, and eleven percent were over fifty years of age. Eight percent of the teachers teach kindergarten and first grade, twenty four percent teach second and third grade, twenty four percent teach fourth and fifth grade and thirteen percent teach sixth grade. Eighteen percent have been teaching zero to five years, thirteen percent have been teaching for six to ten years and fifty three percent have been teaching

for over ten years. Sixty one percent have retained students and eighteen percent had never retained a student.

Responses to questions 1-15

When asked if a child should repeat a grade if he cannot read, sixty two percent agreed where as thirteen percent disagreed. Sixteen percent of the teachers agreed that a child should repeat a grade when he fails to meet the passing score on a standardized test and sixty three percent disagreed. When asked if a child should repeat a grade when he refuses to attempt any task, thirty one percent agreed and forty percent disagreed. When asked whether or not a child should repeat a grade when he cannot complete assigned task throughout the school year, forty two percent agreed and twenty nine percent disagreed. Twenty one percent of teachers surveyed agreed that a child should repeat a grade when behavior gets in the way of learning. However sixty one percent disagreed. Fourteen percent of the teachers surveyed agreed that a child should repeat a grade at the parent's request and fifty two percent disagreed. When asked should a child repeat a grade if he is learning disabled, zero percent agreed and eighty four percent disagreed. Eighteen percent believe that a child should not repeat a grade after the early childhood grades and fifty eight percent disagreed. When asked if a child's self esteem is damaged when he repeats a grade, twenty four percent agreed and thirty four percent disagreed. Eight percent of the teachers surveyed agreed that a student should not repeat a grade if the school is over crowded and eighty four percent disagreed. In response to the statement,

a student should be retained for excessive absences forty eight percent agreed and eighteen percent disagreed.

When asked if repeating a grade can mean the difference between success and failure for certain students, eighty three percent agreed and three percent disagreed. Only eight percent believed teachers retained students because they fear ridicule from colleagues for passing students who are not ready for the next grade and seventy eight percent disagreed. When asked if remediation is an effective alternative to grade retention sixty eight percent agreed and sixteen percent disagreed. When asked whether after school tutoring programs are effective alternatives to grade retention fifty percent agreed and twenty six percent disagreed.

Responses to open ended questions

When asked under what conditions should a student be retained, the responses varied. The frequent response was that if a student is not functioning on grade level he should be retained. Some examples given were that of non readers in the upper grades who are reading on a two percentile level which is equivalent to a pre- primer reading level. Students who had excessive absences and poor academic skills were also reasons for retaining. Some teachers considered retaining students who were capable of doing the class work but put on effort into their schooling. A couple of teachers have retained students who needed to be evaluated for special education, but the parents refuse to have their children evaluated. In the case of kindergarten retention, a kindergartener would be retained when

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the teacher believed the student was not developmentally ready for first grade. Some students who are new to the country may benefit from repeating a grade.

When asked whether grade retention is most beneficial to the student of the primary grades or the upper grades, Majority of the teachers surveyed believed that it is most beneficial for the students to be retained in the primary grades. The reasons being that students must learn the basic fundamentals for learning in the primary grades. A strong foundation must be established to ensure future academic success. The teachers also believed that there is less chance of damaging a student's self esteem and there is less of a social stigma. They also believe it is easier to give remediation when problems are caught early. One person believed it to be beneficial to retain students in the upper grades because the concepts are more difficult.

When asked whether retained students' progress had been followed, some teachers said that they kept up with the students and that retention was beneficial for the students. These retained students matured, became better readers, and their self confidence increased. Other teachers who were able to keep up with their retained students believed retention did not help because the students were promoted mid year. Few teachers were not able to keep up with their retained students because the students left the school. A few teachers said that it was too early to tell because the students were retained this past June.

Views on school policy. A few teachers believed the school retention policy to be fair. They agree that students should be on grade level in order to be promoted. Many were aware of the school's policy, but they did not agree with the policy. They believe students should not be socially promoted. They believe that students should be retained in the lower grades and that the supervisors of the early childhood grades should not push students on. They do not believe students should be moved on because of over crowding. Many stated that retention should be based on ability and not used as a punishment for students with behavior problems. Also a few believe students should not be retained after the fourth grade. Many teachers were unaware of the school's policy and based their opinions on their past experiences or their colleagues experiences.

Ideal ways of retaining. Many believe there are no ideal ways of retaining students. However they offered some suggestions. Some believe that retained classes should have very low class registers. Some suggested bridge, ungraded, or gates classes. These teachers suggest that a strong support service is needed to help students achieve. Some believe students should be screened early to receive these services. A couple of teachers believe that retention will not work if the teaching approach and the setting is the same as what the child previously experienced. A few teachers believe in mid year promotion if the child showed academic progress.

Alternatives to retention. The responses to alternatives to retention were very similar to the ideal ways of retaining. Some teachers suggested ungraded, gates and bridge classes. Many believe that smaller classes will be one way of preventing grade retention. Students will get more individual attention. In addition to small class sizes, few teachers believe that teachers should move with their students. Many teachers believe that at risk students need a strong support service, resource room, guidance, speech, ESL, and tutoring. At risk students will benefit from literacy enhancement projects. Some teachers suggest mandatory after school and half day summer programs. Mandatory after school programs will help at risk students if the students' progress is monitored closely and constant adjustments are made to meet the students' needs. After the summer programs end the students should be re-evaluated. If progress is satisfactory the students should be placed in their regular grade. The classes and different programs that are established to help students achieve should have a very intensive basic skill building plan.

SUMMARY

What I concluded from my questionnaire is that teachers are very concerned about doing what is best for their students to help them achieve. The responses to the questionnaire were very similar to what researchers have reported on the topic of grade retention 61 percent of the teachers surveyed believe in retaining students who are not ready to move on to the next grade. Many teachers believe that students who cannot read should

not be promoted. However they do not all agree that the standardized reading test scores should be an indicator of whether a student is promoted or retained. Many teachers believe that retention can mean the difference between future success or failure for some students. Those who have retained students and were able to keep up with them believed in most cases that the children benefited. The children matured, became confident students as well as better readers. A few teachers have retained students because the students had great potential but put no effort in their school work. A few teachers also retained students who were in need of special education placement, but their parents refused to have their children evaluated. These students have not been able to successfully do grade appropriate tasks and were reading on a pre- primer grade level for years. Some teachers retained students who were absent from school for more than half of the school term. A child cannot learn the curriculum of a grade when absent this many days. Especially when there is no evidence of a formal home instruction program.

The teacher agree that it is most beneficial for the child to be retained in the primary grades rather than the upper grades. They believe it to be very important that the child has a strong basic skills foundation. At this level there is less of a social stigma and less chances of damaging a child's self esteem.

As far as the school policy is concerned, many teachers based their opinions of the policy on their own personal experiences or of their colleagues experiences. Many were aware

of the school policy. A few did not have a clear understanding of the policy. Many did not agree with the school's policy. Most teachers agreed that the students did not benefit from social promotion, mid year promotion, and pushing students on because of over crowding. They also believed that the lower grades supervisors should retain students instead of passing them before they are ready. The teachers believe that retention should be based on the child's ability and performance and should not be used as a punishment for behavior.

These findings have been very similar to what researchers have found about the benefits and ineffectiveness of grade retention.

In an attempt to lowering the rate of our at risk population and to meet the national goal off all students being able to read by the end of the third grade, our district has adopted a very intensive literacy program entitled Project Read. This program targets the at risk population. Classes receive extra reading support services. One program is called literacy enhancement. In this program the classroom teacher, a reading teacher and an educational assistant work in one room for one period a day. The teachers have whole group and then small group lessons and activities. Some classes have reading teachers come into the room and work with a small group while the rest of the class works with the teacher. This reading program is called guided reading. In addition to the Project Read Program, we have after school and summer school programs. It is suggested by the teachers surveyed that these programs must keep progress

records and revise their plans to continuously meet the needs of the students enrolled in the programs. We also have a strong support service of resource room, speech, ESL, and guidance. The teachers agree that these programs implemented early would be an alternative to grade retention. These teachers also believe that the school should also have bridge, ungraded and gates classes for those students who are at risk. These classes should have very low registers and should include an intensive basic skill building plan. Our school also offers parent workshops and parent-child workshops. The teachers believe that it is essential that parents are involved in the students learning and kept up to date as to how to best help their children succeed.

It is my hope that teachers will soon not be faced with the decision to retain or promote. I hope the focus remains on how we can perfect the school system by continuing to perfect on early intervention programs that while produce high achievers.

RESOURCES

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